STUDIES IN THE

OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2016

by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

> According to Jeremiah 18:18, prophets, priests, and sages molded the cultural life of Israel, the sages being an ancient and influential group (Isa 29:14). In the early days their wisdom was probably declared in the gates for all to hear (Job 29:7-25). Their teachings were preeminently concerned with truth that had stood the test of experience—it had to ring true.... They classified people into two groups—those who were wise, who possessed moral qualities to which wisdom makes her moral appear, and those who are deficient in the same.... Accordingly, the teachings of Proverbs are of the highest ethical quality, relating virtue to the will of God. The disaster that comes to folly and vice is part of divine retribution—a more immediate concern than the question of immorality.
>
> **Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:890.**

Proverbs

I. Introduction

Proverbs is unique. It is a book on its own, set apart by its provocative, pithy, sometimes enigmatic statements. But it is even more unique in that it is a book entirely written to the individual. In it, the man of God, not the people of God, are addressed. And the contents are so approachable and apropos that it is applicable both universally to every person regardless of cultural or national context, as well as to every point in human history. Thus, a person never outgrows a need for Proverbs. Though the book it directed toward the naive son, its sayings will continue to offer challenges and insights into skillfully living out God's plan for life. This is because wisdom is a process in which you never finally arrive. The ultimate goal of the book is to produce a reverential fear of God, and thus to provoke faith in him. Wisdom is both the path towards that end and the resultant quality that follows.

A. *Composition*

Authorship of the book (or at least a large percentage of it) has traditionally been attributed to Solomon, as taken from the opening title of the work: "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel" (1:1). By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, liberal skepticism had concluded that the various sayings of the book were the product of centuries of Israelite history, with large portions of the book assigned to the exilic and post-exilic periods. Longer discourses such as chapters 1-9 were assumed to be later forms

than the more pithy sayings of the rest of the book, and the sections which depicted a personification of wisdom were taken as characteristics of later Greek influences on Hebrew writing. Thus, the view that Solomon penned a good majority of the contents of the book was abandoned.

Yet there has been a surprising amount of research done on the background of the book of Proverbs, and recent discoveries have overturned this liberal, scholarly "consensus." Rooker writes,

> Because of the relatively recent uncovering of comparative wisdom material from the ANE the critical consensus that prevailed just a few short generations ago has now collapsed. The position that the shorter sayings in Proverbs preceded the writings of the longer discourses has been undermined from what has been found in comparative wisdom writings from Egypt and Mesopotamia. In these ANE writings the longer discourse was a prevalent wisdom genre long before Solomon. Thus the length of a proverb can no longer be used as a criterion for dating. In addition, the personification of wisdom is also evident in early Egyptian writings, while other early personifications are evident in Canaanite, Hittite, Hurrian, and Babylonian literature, thereby undermining the notion that this practice had been borrowed from the Greeks late in Israel's history.[1]

Researchers, in fact, found that the genre of "wisdom literature" to which the Book of Proverbs appropriately belongs, is a style and genre of literature common to the ANE world and dates back long before the time of Solomon. How long? Documents such as *Instructions of Kagemni* and *Instructions of Ptah-hotep*, from the Old Kingdom of Egypt (2686-2160 B.C.), date all the way back to 2450 B.C. These texts include "advise on proper decorum for a court official"[2] and counsel on proper speech. In *Instruction of Merikare* (2160-2040 B.C.), the king advises his son of the qualities necessary to be king. Astonishingly, these documents actually predate Abraham!

Later texts evidencing the antiquity of wisdom literature come from the New Kingdom period of Egypt (1580-1100 B.C.), including one especially provocative document entitled *The Wisdom of Amenemope*. Dating to 1070-945 B.C., this text is generally regarded as forming the literary background for Proverbs 22:17-24:22. As the sample below demonstrates, the similarities between the texts are striking:

---

[1] Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 528.

[2] Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *EBC*, 12 vols., rev. ed., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:883.

Amenemope	***Proverbs***
Give your ear and hear what is said, give your ear to understand it. Putting them in your heart is worthwhile (1).	Listen closely, pay attention to the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge. For it is pleasing if you keep them within you and if they are constantly on your lips (22:17-18).
Better is bread when the heart is happy, than riches with sorrow (6).	Better a little with fear of the Lord than great treasure with turmoil (15:16).
Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land (6).	Don't move the ancient property lines, and don't encroach on the fields of the fatherless (23:10).
The [riches] have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to the heavens (8).	It disappears, for it makes wings for itself and flies like an eagle to the sky (23:5b).

Of course, the texts are not an exact match, nor would we expect them to be. Yet there is virtually no question that the Amenemope texts predates the Solomonic proverbs and similar enough to attest direct influence.[3] Add to these the wisdom literature discovered in Mesopotamia, with documents dating as early as 2000 B.C., and there is a wealth of extra-biblical support for the existence of wisdom literature at the time of Solomon. Of course, this should not come as a surprise considering that the OT itself alludes to the wisdom for which Egypt and Mesopotamia were well recognized (1 Kgs 4:30; Dan 1:4, 17, 20).

All of this provides strong support for Solomonic authorship. Contrary to the skeptical yet ignorant assumptions of early liberal scholarship, there was a wealth of wisdom literature extant during the time of Solomon. In fact, it is entirely consistent with the Scripture's portrayal of Solomon, who was noted to possess matchless wisdom, authoring 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs, to the point that his wisdom garnered international attention (1 Kgs 4:29-34).

This is not to say that Solomon authored the entire book. Contrary to certain Jewish traditions, the names Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) most likely represent different individuals rather than Solomonic pseudonyms.[4] It also seems clear in light of the discovery of the *Amenemope* text that 22:17-24:22 represents a separate collection of proverbs by an anonymous source.

The formation of the book as a whole is also puzzling and ultimately there is no way to confidently reconstruct how it came together in its final form. Apparently, Solomon not only composed original proverbs but also collected sayings from other wise men and sages, and it seems that 22:17-24:34 either represents the writings of another individual who adapted *Amenemope's* text to fit a Yahwistic faith or Solomon's own adaptation of the material. Amenemope, after all, was a contemporary of Solomon, and the biblical account

[3] Ibid., 5:884.

[4] Ibid., 5:886.

attests to the influx of Egyptian influence into Solomon's reign both through marriage as well as trade (cf. 1 Kgs 9:16; 10:28).

Regardless, it is apparent that around 700 B.C., Hezekiah commissioned his men to collect more Solomonic sayings (chs. 25-29). Eventually, the writings of Agur and Lemuel were added to complete the collection that is now the final form of the book of Proverbs. Whether this work was accomplished under Hezekiah's leadership or completed sometime later, contemporary scholarship of both liberal and conservative persuasions, especially in the realm of literary criticism, have noted the markedly pre-exilic nature of the book.[5]

B. ***Literary Form***

The Hebrew term for proverb is מָשָׁל (*mashal*), and it has generally been defined as "a short, pregnant sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations."[6] Of course, even a cursory reading of the book of Proverbs uncovers the inadequacy of this definition. Rather, the term designates a wide range of forms throughout the book. At times, it refers to longer discourses on a particular subject (chs. 1-9), while at other times it refers to short, pithy sayings that demonstrate, above all else, extreme brevity.

Yet, in general, the Hebrew proverb is characterized by several features:

1) **Brevity:** proverbs tend to use an incredible economy of words. Indeed, a proverb may contain only 5-8 Hebrew words, yet may require 10-12 English words to translate. Unfortunately, this makes it more difficult to recognize the immense rhetorical impact of these statements.

2) **Rhetorical Devices:** they utilize a wide variety of rhetorical devices such as allegory, taunt, lament, simile, repetition, alliteration, and assonance.

3) **Parallelism:** Proverbs make extensive use of parallelism. While the 2-line form of proverb is the most frequently employed form in the book, certain sections display particular affinity for length of line and type of parallelism. In 10:1-15:33, for example, proverbs typically appear in 2-line form using antithetical parallelism, while in 16:1-22:16, they tend more towards 2-line form in synonymous or synthetic parallelism. Meanwhile, 22:17-24:22 includes a variety of forms, but leans toward 4-line proverbs. And 31:10-31, of course, is marked by its alphabetic acrostic form.[7]

4) **Instruction:** proverbs are didactic in nature. Whether through formal instruction using imperatives and prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), or through observations of traits or acts that should be followed or avoided (14:31), example stories (7:6-23), wis-

[5] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 529.

[6] Robert Balgarnie Scott Young, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 58.

[7] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 531.

dom speeches (8:1-36), or numerical sayings (6:16-19), proverbs aims to *instruct* the reader to wise living.

5) **Motivation:** proverbs accomplish instruction through motivation. Often, motivation comes through the use of subordinate clauses which clarify the purpose, reason, or result of the instruction. At other times, the motivation is given more generically. But in general, proverbs operate by observation. They reflect on how things happen in the world in relation to right values and right conduct.[8] Ross, in remarking on Scott's observations, writes,

> Scott lists seven ways that this is done in the book: proverbs may present (1) things that appear distinct but are similar (14:4a), (2) things that seem the same but are different (27:7b), (3) things that are similar (using similes as in 25:25), (4) things that are absurd or futile (17:16), (5) sayings that classify types of people (14:15), (6) sayings that indicate relative values (27:3), and (7) sayings that set forth consequences (27:18).[9]

C. ***Proverbs & Inspiration***

Comparative literary criticism has offered a number of significant contributions to the study of the book of Proverbs. For one, as already noted, these ANE wisdom texts attest to the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, particularly that of the longer wisdom discourses of chapters 1-9. It has also helped our understanding of the various forms of wisdom literature utilized in the ANE, such as proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions.

It has provided valuable insight into tracing similar concepts across cultural literary boundaries. For instance, Solomon's personification of wisdom in the form of a virtuous, attractive woman (1:20-33; 8-36; 9:1-6) finds parallel attestation in the Egyptian personification of *maat*. As Ross explains,

> Another concept found in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature is the rhetorical use of personification to convey abstract concepts such as intelligence, understanding, justice, and skill. The biblical figure of personified wisdom (Prov 8) corresponds to the personification of *maat* in Egyptian art and literature.[10]

Such literary parallels, as well as the borrowing and/or adaptation of pagan texts such as that of Amenemope are extremely helpful for biblical scholars looking to understand the ANE cultural context out of which the biblical proverbs as a form developed. Yet they can be alarming to lay believers, who can't seem to reconcile it with their understanding of the doctrine of inspiration. This is a legitimate concern, but one that can be assuaged when set in a right context.

---

[8] Ibid., 5:889.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ross, "Proverbs," 5:885.

Biblical inspiration, as one might recall, is the doctrine that all Scripture ultimately comes from God (2 Tim 3:16) through the superintendence of the Holy Spirit so that what was written by the biblical writers was exactly what God intended (2 Pet 1:21). It is this truth that necessitates other doctrines, such as inerrancy and infallibility. If the Scripture is, in actuality, God's very words, then it is

1) not liable to prove false or mistaken [inerrancy]

2) incapable of teaching deception [infallibility]

The process by which inspiration occurred, while outlined theologically in 2 Peter 1:19-21 and illustrated in Jeremiah 36, is far from cookie-cutter. Indeed, at times biblical writers received their information by means of direct, divine revelation—a face-to-face encounter (e.g., Moses). At other times, authors received their revelation through visions, some of which were composed verbatim, while others were perhaps given liberty in how they portrayed the message they received.[11]

With Proverbs, however, inspiration takes a very different form. "The authors," writes Rooker, "often made observations based on creation and human behavior and, inspired by faith, they recorded their observations."[12] Such observations involved the participation of the individual author (e.g., Solomon), who keenly observed his surroundings, noted the patterns and traits of nature, of human attitudes, actions, and interactions, witnessed the consequences of those attitudes and actions, either righteous or wicked, and formed instructions and guidance for his readers (e.g., his son) so as to lead them to live skillfully before Yahweh. Throughout this process, there was always the guiding superintendence of the Holy Spirit, ensuring that while the author may utilize his mind, his background, his observations, his economy of language, etc., what was written was exactly what God intended, even down to each individual part and each individual word. Waltke comments on this process:

> Solomon takes us into his workshop as he drafts one of his proverbs. "I went past the field of the sluggard...thorns had come up everywhere...and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw." On the basis of his observation of the sluggard's vineyard and on his reflection, he coins a proverb: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (Prov 24:30-34; see 6:10-11).[13]

When we take that rather broad process of inspiration in Proverbs and apply it to the use of other ANE wisdom texts, it is possible to see the freedom possessed by the biblical writer. Egypt, after all, was recognized by the writer of Kings as a nation known for its wisdom (1 Kgs 4:30), and Solomon and others recognized the wisdom of some of these writings.

---

[11] Bruce K. Waltke, "Proverbs: Theology of," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:1079.

[12] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 530.

[13] Waltke, "Proverbs," 4:1079.

Yet even when allusion or influence from ANE writings is present, they by no means present identical content. As Ross clarifies,

> Many specific emphases in Proverbs find parallels in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. But even though the collections share some of the same interests, the biblical material is unique in its prerequisite of a personal faith in a personal God. To the Hebrews the success of wisdom did not simply require a compliance with wise instruction but trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (Prov 1:7; 3:5-6; 9:10) who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19-20; 16:4; 21:1). Any ancient wisdom used by the Hebrews had to harmonize with this religious world view, and any ancient wisdom used in this collection took on greater significance when subordinated to the true faith.[14]

It shouldn't surprise us, in fact, that Proverbs shares common literary forms and themes with the ANE world. Part of the doctrine of inspiration involves the doctrine of accommodation—that God communicated using symbols meaningful to his creatures, i.e., language, cultural forms, anthropomorphisms, etc. All throughout the OT, we see that God utilized forms and expressions common to the culture of his people. Israel's relationship with God was a unique relationship unlike any other on the earth, yet it was portrayed through the form of common treaty forms that would have been understandable to the people. Likewise, the fullness of Israel's faith in Yahweh came from divine revelation, yet God included in this revelation customs, standard laws, treaty forms, poetic expressions, and wise sayings compatible with truth and useful in communication of the divine will. As Ross goes on the explain,

> To recognize the biblical texts as divine revelation does not necessarily mean that all its contents had to be previously unknown information. On the contrary, before many of these facts and concepts were written down, they were passed on verbally from generation to generation and consequently could have circulated over vast distances and found their way into many diverse cultures. Therefore, whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the Word of the Lord. Such inclusion then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will.[15]

I think it is assumed that pagan wisdom must be wholly incompatible with biblical revelation and so unusable. Yet in this case, our actions often betray our beliefs, for if we are honest, we admit that we know and recognize many individuals who exemplify the principles of wisdom espoused in the Book of Proverbs, and yet have no relationship with Christ. Yet in reality, what we observe in these instances is the common grace of God for humans, whether true believers or not, to see and recognize wisdom. Sometimes even unbelievers offer some remarkably wise advice to which we assuredly pay attention. Such is the case with the ANE influence on the book of Proverbs.

---

[14] Ross, "Proverbs," 5:885.

[15] Ibid., 5:885-6.

> Very likely the writers deliberately used well-known concepts and expressions from the pagan world to subordinate them to the true religion.... By incorporating wise sayings and motifs (in addition to producing new and unparalleled sayings) and investing them with the higher religious value, the Hebrew sages were in a sense putting new wine into old wine skins. They could forcefully teach, then, that true wisdom was from above and not from below.[16]

In summary, then, the doctrine of inspiration is not incompatible with the idea of ANE wisdom influence on the writers or even the adaptation of outside wisdom genres and sayings. What is important is that, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers recognized the wisdom inherent in these writings yet saw it necessary to subordinate them under the authority of true faith in Yahweh. Without the fear of Yahweh, there is no attaining wisdom, regardless of how wise such ideas are in general.

II. **Major Themes**

Proverbs offers a rich array of topics to which is addresses, all of which intersect the day-to-day avenues of real life. Interestingly, it is not exclusively religious in its focus, but instead aims to discuss human problems in general. Proverbs "concerns [itself] with people as plain, ordinary individuals who live in the world and with the wisdom and folly of their attitudes and actions in the common things of life."[17] As a general rule, it gives little attention to religious topics such as sacrifices, though it rests on the theological presuppositions of the OT. Instead, it is immensely practical. It offers sound advice for success, avoiding failure and shame, experiencing prosperity and wellbeing through the practice of virtue, and uncovering the consequences of vice.

At the same time, Proverbs is not a secular book. Its overall thrust is based on the fear of Yahweh, which is itself an evidence of faith. As Plaut explains, "There are no 'secular' proverbs which can be contrasted with 'religious' ones; everything on earth serves the purposes of God and is potentially holy."[18]

Considering all this, there are a number of topics to which the book speaks, which are outlined concisely by Aitken:[19]

A. ***The Characters in Proverbs***

1. *The Wise Person vs. the Fool*

Perhaps the most prominent characters portrayed in the book are the wise person and the fool. The wise person seeks wisdom and listens to counsel. He practices discipline and self-control. He exercises restraint over his actions, his mind, his attitudes, and

---

[16] Ibid., 5:886.

[17] Kenneth T. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 4.

[18] W. Gunther Plaut, *Book of Proverbs*, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961), 7.

[19] Adapted from K. T. Aitken, "Proverbs: Sayings and Themes," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem E. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:1095-8.

his words. He holds his tongue and knows when to speak and when to remain quiet, and he understands the power of words to either build up or tear down.

In contrast, the fool hates wisdom. He is unwilling to learn wisdom, and he does not seek nor heed other's counsel. He lacks self-control, and this is evident in how he lives, how he talks, and how *much* he talks. More often than not, he speaks when he should not, and his words tend toward maliciousness.

2. *The Simple*

Proverbs also introduces the simple as a third major character who differs from both the wise and the fool. The simple are young, in need of instruction and lack experience and knowledge. He is not a fool, but he can easily become prey to foolishness if someone wise does not take and guide him and instruct him in wisdom.

3. *Other Characters*

Aitken also identifies several other ancillary characters that appear throughout Proverbs, all being different manifestations of the fool. These include the proud, who is arrogant and conceited, and at his worst is known as the scoffer. There is the sluggard, who typifies the fool in his lack of discipline and self-control. There is the miser, who holds on to his possessions and refuses to show generosity to others. There is the drunkard, whose life is wasted away in excess. There is the flatterer whose speech is used as a means for selfish gain, and often as a trap to entice others into evil. There is the whisperer, i.e., the gossip, who slanders others with words.

B. ***The Settings in Proverbs***

The lessons and topics of Proverbs occur in a variety of social and cultural settings:

1. *The Home*

Numerous proverbs provide advice on dynamics within the family unit. Special attention is given to parents and their need to honor and obey their parents, as well as heed their instruction. Parents, as well, are addressed in their task of raising up children. Attention is also given to the particular topic of the nagging wife and thus by extension the necessity of wise discernment for men in taking a wife.

2. *The Community*

A large assortment of proverbs address the various social settings that make up life in a larger community, e.g., friendships, neighbors, the poor, wealth and business. Within this larger construct, Aitken notes two major concerns addressed by these proverbs. The first is a thrust toward maintaining and restoring social harmony and peace. Aitken writes, "Adeptness at stirring up strife is a trait that links together most of the character types."[20] The second concern is that of acquiring and maintaining a good reputation, which introduces the underlying themes of favor and honor. The wise person seeks to gain the approval and respect within the community. Of course, set within the larger OT context, it should be obvious that this kind of approval involves the

[20] Ibid., 4:1096.

practice and recognition of true righteousness. It is not driven by the fear of man, but rather of God.

3. *The City Gate*

   Numerous proverbs deal with actions and interactions which occur specifically at the city gate, which was the location of much commercial and judicial activity. In particular, emphasis is given to the dispensing of justice and the necessity of integrity as opposed to the bearing of false witness. Judges are cautioned on the practice of partiality and accepting bribes. Businessmen are challenged in their commercial dealings, particularly with the assumption of debt.

4. *The Royal Court*

   As a book written in large part by a king who anticipated the eventual assumption of his throne by his own heir, Proverbs has much to say within the setting of the royal court. Numerous proverbs address the practices and requirements of the wise king, especially as he deals with issues of justice and the care of the poor. Additionally, those who work within the royal court, i.e., courtiers, are also frequently addressed with advice on how to conduct oneself as to maintain good favor with the king, including how to speak and how to act within the king's presence.

C. ***The Ethics of Proverbs***

The ethics of Proverbs are permeated throughout the voluminous sayings of the book. However, as Aitken notes, the main ethical and theological thrusts of the work are introduced in the first nine chapters, which actually serve as an introduction to the book as a whole (see Literary Structure for more details).

1. *The Fear of Yahweh*

   The fear of (i.e., reverence for) Yahweh is the theological framework for the entire book. Introduced in 1:7 and then revisited 9:10, the book emphasizes that the fear of Yahweh is the "beginning of wisdom." That is to say, the principle of wisdom begins with living in reverence for God. Rooker writes,

   > The presupposition behind the instruction and the wisdom to be attained is the fear or reverence of God, a commitment to put the Lord as the center of one's life (1:7). This commitment to the Lord is the appropriate starting point for the acquiring of wisdom. Fearing the Lord determines one's progress in wisdom and is characterized by obedience.[21]

   In other words, the fear of Yahweh is the "proper theological and hermeneutical grid" for understanding the content of the book, and this thrust throughout the book is the theological feature that harmonizes Proverbs with the Torah and the Prophets. While the book may not be overtly religious, its emphasis on fearing God as both the foundation for and the consequence of attaining wisdom finds deep roots in the covenantal framework of the OT.

[21] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 532.

After all, apart from the commands concerning idolatry and the Sabbath, every other principle outlined in the Ten Commandments is illustrated in Proverbs.[22] In fact, the book of Proverbs is more covenantal than one might realize. As Rooker explains,

> The proverbs spell out the impact of the covenant relationship on each individual Israelite's life before God. This focus is maintained even though the actual history of the nation Israel is virtually ignored in the book. God promises in the law that violation of the covenant would result in the dispending of covenant curses for the nation (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). Also Proverbs assumes a retribution theology in which individuals are held accountable for their actions by being judged appropriately (10:2-3, 6-7, 25, 27, 30; 11:4-6). Covenant loyalty and faithfulness is the standard for the godly life in Proverbs. At the same time the proverbs present general guidelines, not absolute promises or inflexible laws for every specific situation.[23]

2. *The Two Ways*

Teaching of the concept of two distinctive paths or ways is a repeated theme in Scripture (Ps 1:1, 6; Matt 7:13-14). Obviously, these paths correspond to the characters who walk them. The wise take the way of wisdom, while the fool takes the way of folly, the path of the wicked. "The two ways," Aitken writes, "has particularly the ethical and the moral dimensions of wisdom in view. It serves as a metaphor for the contrasting behavior or lifestyles of the righteous and the wicked, and also for the contrasting fates that lie in store for them."[24]

3. *Life and Death*

Corresponding to these moral paths of the wise and foolish are the corresponding fates that await them on their journey's end. As Aitken articulates,

> The contrast between life and death is succinctly expressed at the end of the speech by personified Wisdom in 8:35-36: "Whoever finds me finds life ... all who hate me love death." Wisdom holds the staff of long life in her right hand (3:16-18), and she is the "fountain of life" (16:22). By contrast the adulteress, who in 9:13-18 emerges as the personification of folly and wickedness, dwells at the jowls of the underworld and drags her victims down to Sheol (2:18; 7:27; 9:18). As Wisdom's fruit, life means both length of days and richness and fullness of life. Likewise, as the consequence of wickedness, death means not only a premature death but even more, a "living death," i.e., the path to death is the path to all that diminishes life's fullness and saps its vitality.[25]

4. *Retribution*

The theory of retribution undergirds the contrasts of life and death. The concept of rewarding righteousness and punishing wickedness finds its roots in the covenant

---

[22] Ibid., 536.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Aitken, "Proverbs," 4:1097.

[25] Ibid.

language of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Yet it is given a practicality in the book of Proverbs as the writers reflect not only on the ultimate spiritual and moral consequences of evil but also on the everyday practical consequences of walking the path of wisdom or the path of folly.

III. **Purpose**

Proverbs outlines its own purpose as a book in verses 2-7. Using five infinitive verbs paired with a variety of specific words and phrases, it clearly reveals the reason why we have it has been given to us as part of the canon of Scripture:

Purpose of Proverbs

To know...	wisdom & instruction
To discern...	The sayings of understanding
To receive	Instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity
To give...	Prudence to the naive, and knowledge and discretion to the youth
To understand...	A proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles

Rooker remarks, "Thus the book is like an instruction manual to lead people in righteous living before God."[26]

All of these statements is summarized with the spiritual principle that permeates the entirety of the book: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7). This is what separates the biblical proverb from all manner of worldly wisdom. The latter may contain helpful advice, but obedience to them is not inherently a spiritual issue. But obedience to the latter is inherently a moral and spiritual matter. Without fear of God—a right relationship with God—it is impossible to say that someone has wisdom, regardless of how much wisdom they may articulate. Ross explains,

> The book teaches that this fear of the Lord is the evidence of faith; for the wise teacher enjoins people to trust in the Lord whose counsel stands (19:21) and not their own understanding (3:5-7). The purpose of proverbial teaching, then is to inspire faith in the Lord (22:19). Such reverential fear requires a personal knowledge of the Lord ("fear" and "knowledge" are parallel in 9:10)—the find this fear is the find knowledge (2:5), a knowledge that comes by revelation (3:6). Ultimately, however, the fear of the Lord is manifested in a life of obedience, confession and forsaking sin (28:18), and doing what is right (21:3), which is the believer's task before God (17:3).[27]

With that beings said, the book's purpose may be summarized in the following way: *The young, naive son is given exhortation to and instruction in the ways of wisdom*.

IV. **Literary Structure**

Some have proposed a five-part outline as an analogy to the five books of Moses. However, it seems to fit better with the flow of the book to divide the book into sections based on each new title given throughout its contents.

---

[26] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 531.

[27] Ross, "Proverbs," 5:890.

Outline of Proverbs

A. Solomon's Reflection on the Way of Wisdom (1:1-9:18)

As already stated, chapters 1-9 actually form an introduction to the entire book. Containing an overall statement attributing authorship to Solomon (1:1), and outlining the book's overall purpose (1:2-7), the rest of this section comprises a series of speeches setting out the major theological concepts that will be fleshed out in greater detail throughout the remainder of the book. With a decidedly parental tone, Proverbs 1:8-9:18

> appears to be an organized introduction to the book with many admonitions and prohibitions as well as example stories and personified wisdom-speech. This section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1-7), but folly may interrupt this purpose (1:8-33); there are advantages to seeking wisdom (2:1-4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (5:1-6:19); there are advantages to finding wisdom (6:20-9:12), but folly may prevent this too (9:13-18).[28]

B. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)

This first major section is a series of 375 seemingly unrelated proverbial statements arranged in no apparent order. At the same time, the arrangement is no entirely haphazard. The proverbs in this section contain observations about life made in short, pithy statements, most commonly only two lines long, and outlines the contrasts between the righteous and the wicked and the consequences of each lifestyle. For this reason, their order may very well be intentionally reflective of the "seemingly indiscriminate order in which people deal with these life issues."[29]

C. Anonymous Wise Sayings (22:17-24:22)

The section consists of 29-30 proverbial poems, each 2-3 lines in length. They include both exhortations and warnings accompanied by descriptions of potential consequences. About a third of this section bears similarities to *The Wisdom of Amenemope*, and may have been borrowed by Solomon or another Hebrew sage and adapted to operate within the parameters of the Israelite faith.

D. More Anonymous Sayings (24:23-34)

This section includes additional wisdom sayings most likely produced by those associated with the royal court. Like Hezekiah's men, they may have been commissioned with the task of collecting wise sayings and axioms about the different aspects of normal life.

E. More Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)

Commissioned by King Hezekiah, these proverbs represent a collection of material gathered by royal scribes and may reflect the king's desire to have a greater effect of the religious reforms taking place under his leadership (2 Kgs 18-20; Isa 36-39). This may be why kingly responsibilities play an important role in this section.

---

[28] Ibid., 5:889.

[29] Rooker, "The Book of Proverbs," 534.

F. Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)

Most prominent in this section are a series of graded numerical sayings in an x, x + 1 pattern similar to other sections of the OT (Amos 1-2; Mic 5:5). This section alludes to the four types of individuals mentioned in 30:11-14.

G. Sayings of Lemuel (30:1-31)

This section includes a short portion addressing social issues (31:2-9), followed by an acrostically arranged poem describing the "virtuous woman" (31:10-31). While they appear unrelated, the two sections overlap in their reference to women (vv. 3, 10), a concern for noble character (vv. 3, 10), and a concern for the poor (vv. 9, 20). Some have suggested that this virtuous woman is, in fact, a return of the personified wisdom of chapter 8. After all, she seems to display all the characteristics of wisdom found throughout the rest of the book, most importantly the fear of Yahweh (vv. 27-31), which forms a fitting return to the overarching theme of the book outlined in 1:7 and 9:10. After all, many have called the characteristics of this woman idealistic and as such virtually unattainable.

However, when we broaden our scope to consider the entire OT canon, we find that Scripture does reference a woman—the only woman, in fact—who is described as an "excellent woman." For it is Ruth whom Boaz calls "a woman of excellence" (Ruth 3:11), and just as with the excellent woman of Proverbs, her virtue had become well-known throughout the town (Ruth 3:11; cf. Prov 31:23).